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# PORTRAIT OF SIDNEY LANIER

BY GAMALIEL BRADFORD

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LANIER lived in a spiritual whirlwind, until it snuffed him out. His whole existence was a fight with circumstances; but if every external circumstance had been easy for him, still he would have nourished a perpetual tumult and turmoil within.

Nor was this instinct of fighting wholly figurative or spiritual. As a mere child, Lanier organized a military company among his Georgia playmates and drilled them so thoroughly that they were admitted to parade beside their elders. Before he was a man, the Civil War came, and he enlisted in the cause of his beloved South and served her with distinction. Military glory was not the kind he sought. He was not in the least a bravo or a ranter, and the references in his letters to his military experiences are few and slight. But a touch now and then shows that he knew what suffering was and what endurance was: "Did you ever lie for a whole day after being wounded, and then have water brought to you? If so, you will know how your words came to me." And if he had felt the agony and strain of war, so he responded with the keenest thrill to its picturesqueness, its fever of excitement, its glow and glory.

But the clash of physical war was the least part of Lanier's fierce and constant struggles with circumstance. From his youth till his death in 1881, in his fortieth year, he had ill-health against him, had to contend not only with actual disease and pain, but with the depression and the listless, hopeless discouragement which disease and pain bring with them and leave behind them. The results of this incessant struggle were written on his face and figure, manly and dignified and noble as they were. The worn carriage showed it, the finely cut features, the deep, earnest, passionate eyes, the hands that were vigorous, but white and fine

and delicate. He understood and analyzed his condition perfectly, sometimes trumpeting those fits of exaltation which seem to lift the tuberculous invalid above the world: "I feel to-day as if I had been a dry leathery carcass of a man into whom some one had pumped strong currents of fresh blood, of abounding life, and of vigorous strength. I cannot remember when I have felt so crisp, so springy, and so gloriously unconscious of lungs." And again he describes consumptives as "beyond all measure the keenest sufferers of all the stricken of the world," or casually speaks of himself, "tortured as I was this morning, with a living egg of pain away in under my collar bone." But never for a moment could pain or lassitude subdue him or make him give up the struggle to do his work. In the splendid moments of hope he worked. In the dark, dull moments of despair he worked. If ever a man died fighting, he did.

All these strains and torments of ill-health are bad enough when one has means to meet them, can afford at least the necessary lenitives, without anxiety as to where every dollar is to come from. This was far from being the case with Lanier. No one ever lived who cared less for the excitement or the satisfaction of accumulating wealth. He did not even long for the finer luxuries and elegancies that go with wealth, it was simply a question of hard, bitter struggle for actual necessities. Brought up in the full taste of Southern ease and abundance, he found himself, at the close of the War, like so many Southerners, beginning life in the most cramping bonds of poverty, obliged to fight his way upward from the bottom against every difficulty that material obstacles could oppose to him. Determined as he was to win success in lines of life not in themselves profitable, or only rarely and poorly so, he could not give himself to getting money with the single energy which is most of all necessary to achieve that result.

How desperate, how constant, how blighting this need of money was, is written all through Lanier's biography and letters. Bread—mere, bare bread—is the word that occurs and recurs. Indiscreet utterance "may interfere with one's already very short allowance of bread." Again, "My head and my heart are both so full of poems which the dreadful struggle for bread does not give me time to put on paper."

Any honest means of earning is resorted to. To all are given faithful, conscientious effort. Comfort and independ-

ence are achieved from none. Teaching? The last pitiful refuge of those who have immortal thoughts to sell? "Tis terrible work, and the labor difficulties . . . make the pay very slim." Government employment? It requires influence, and immortal thoughts are the last requisite for it. "I have allowed a friend to make application to every department in Washington for even the humblest position . . . but without success." The strain wears out body, wears out soul, wears out courage, wears out hope. "Altogether it seems as if there wasn't any place for me in this world, and if it were not for May I should certainly quit it, in mortification at being so useless." To some it seems that his physical decay has a physical cause; but he finds the cause rather in "the bitterness of having to spend my time in making academic lectures and boy's books—potboilers all—when a thousand songs are singing in my heart that will certainly kill me if I do not utter them soon."

For among all these external struggles the most intense and passionate, made of course doubly so by the distraction of the others, was the struggle for reputation, recognition, success in the positive career, or careers, since music was almost as dear to him as poetry, that he had chosen for himself. And in this struggle, more than in any other, come the fierce alternations of hope and despair. In the first rapture of achievement, after the toil and travail of creation, work actually finished seems worth doing, seems never indeed a full realization of one's ideal, but seems at any rate to embody something of what one aimed at, what one hoped for. One is proud of it, if not satisfied with it, and above all one is inspired by what one has done with infinite confidence in what one can do. "So many great ideas for Art are born to me each day, I am swept away into the land of All-Delight by their strenuous sweet whirlwind." And then come the reaction and the despair. What seemed yesterday a masterpiece, today sounds dull and poor and tawdry, and that land of All-Delight becomes merely as barren as your heart.

As some stay against this wretched self-distrust, this bankruptcy of confidence, you must have the recognition of others. There are times when your own approval seems as nothing, and even so you cannot get it. Then a simple word of appreciation may bring heaven to you. To be told by an ardent admirer "that I was not only the founder of a school

of music, but the founder of American music," is intoxicating, even if you quite understand the exaggeration of the statement. Even more intoxicating is it to feel and see that you have carried a great company of people out of themselves, as Lanier so often did by his wonderful flute-playing. "When I allowed the last note to die, a simultaneous cry of pleasure broke forth from men and women that almost amounted to a shout, and I stood and received the congratulations that thereupon came in, so wrought up by my own playing with thoughts, that I could but smile mechanically, and make stereotyped returns to the pleasant sayings, what time my heart worked falteringly, like a mouth that is about to cry."

And even such triumph is not enough for the eager spirit, but it yearns for more creation and more recognition and more and more. There is no bound, no limit, because beauty is limitless and life is limitless. To be the founder of American music would be well; but might there not be something more than that, something, who can tell what? So through all the long and bitter struggle with circumstance the soul goes staggering, reaching onward, with no rest, no respite, because the outer struggle is but the image and reflection of the deeper and more passionate struggle within.

For Lanier's was none of those contented spirits who meet the battle of the world with a quiet and self-subdued mastery, who oppose to its rude shocks the unfailing tenacity of a clear and four-square purpose. With him the inner world was as full of battle as the outer. His thinking life was one long, unbroken effort to solve problems, to break through difficulties instead of dodging them, to reach the last analysis of his own soul and the souls of others. Life could never have stood still for him, never have stagnated. There was always some obstacle to be met, to be fought with, to be conquered.

For such a nature the moral life meant struggle, of course. Little errors became great sins and had to be mourned over with a repentance wholly out of proportion to the fault. But the same ardor was carried into the aesthetic world, also. The enjoyment of great beauty, in music or poetry, was not a serene enchantment, a mere ecstatic oblivion, but was sought with suffering and maintained with long effort and paid for too often with

enormous lassitude. Spiritual delight is dearly bought—perhaps not too dearly bought, but dearly bought at any rate—when it has to be described like this: “I have just concluded a half-dozen delicious hours, during which I have been devouring, with a hungry ferocity of rapture which I know not how to express, *The Life of Robert Schumann*.” And Lanier’s own criticism of this same Schumann is certainly by no means true of Lanier himself: “His sympathies were not *big* enough, he did not go through the awful struggle of genius, and lash and storm and beat about until his soul was grown large enough to embrace the whole of life and the All of things.”

Even in matters of pure intelligence, not essentially aesthetic or emotional, even in curious metaphysical or psychological speculations, of no direct bearing on the conduct of life, Lanier showed the same intensity and activity and sincerity. He thought with passion, did not play with ideas or trifle with them or amuse himself with them, but threw himself upon them with a fierce determination to get rid of the rags and shroudings of tradition and convention and thrust way down to the solid structure of naked verity. He speaks somewhere of “the Latin works of Lucretius, whom I have long desired to study,” and in whom he found a friend. For in all literature and in all thought there is no soul who made thinking more of a battle than Lucretius did, and Lanier is like him.

It is this fighting quality of the analysis, rather than its actual permanent result, that gives a profound interest to Lanier’s critical writings. His books on the English novel and on *The Science of English Verse* may not have the highest permanent critical value. Their ample abundance of theorizing may not always work out to a final and satisfying illumination of fact. But there is an intensity, a throb in their spiritual movement that whirls you along with it, whether you agree or not. Indeed the intellectual activity is too great for clarity. Every simplest element and principle is subjected to an uncompromising test of investigation and is torn to pieces with an ingenuity of insight which discovers fine threads of affinity and causality hardly perceptible to coarser vision. Again as with Lucretius, one feels that one is battered with a storm of solutions for problems that can be solved more simply or need not be solved at all. And as with Lucretius, one is sometimes moved to pity to see

such a splendid intelligence wearing itself out for futile results.

But the passion for theory, for getting to the bottom of things, is infectious, just the same. This passion is manifest not only in Lanier's formal criticism, but in all his writing and thinking. "I don't mean this for a theory," he says in one case: "I hate theories." But, hate them or not, he was born to theorize; not to accept blindly the theories of others, not to wallow widely in inherited formulæ: "Why do we cling so to humbugs?" he exclaims. But into humbugs, and into the crowding facts of life and into the elusive secrets of passion, he loved to plunge the fine instrument of thought and twist it and turn it, with a touching confidence that it would at last lead him to the inmost shrine of truth. He was no disbeliever in intellect, no doubter of the supremacy of reason, he was not smothered with education until he came to despise education altogether, like Henry Adams. He believed that the secrets of God could be wrestled for, that every good thing was an object of combat and conquest, and that, whatever peace might be in heaven, life on this earth, to be life at all, must be perpetual war. "A soul and a sense linked together in order to fight each other more conveniently, compose a man."

At the same time I would not give the impression that Lanier was always fighting, that he was one of those uncomfortable persons who thrust their combative tendencies into the face of every interlocutor or housemate. Far from it. His external battles were confined to proper occasions, and such unfailing conflict as he had within was masked by perfect control and gracious dignity and ease. To chat with him an hour you would never suspect that he carried a world war in his heart.

Moreover, like all great fighters whose fights are worth anything, he had his hours of peace, his intervals of relaxation, when he could forget even the fierce violence of thought. His beautiful appeal to tranquillity does indeed seem more like a longing than a hope:

Oh! as thou liv'st in all this sky and sea  
That likewise lovingly do live in thee,  
So melt my soul in thee, and thine in me,  
Divine Tranquillity!

Yet even in the furious ardor of his art there were charming moments of refreshment and repose. Music,

though, in a sense, more than any the art of struggle, though its essence seems to consist of effort for the impossible, of discords resolved only to be perpetually renewed and to seek for new resolution forever—music has its suggestions of wide quiet and all-involving peace, only the more celestial for their rarity. Writing, which at times tears the soul to shreds with its turbulent effort, which at times means only a vain, futile, exhausting wrestle with thoughts that will not be disciplined and words that flit away, writing also has its glorious compensations, when all the puzzles vanish, and sudden, splendid phrases come from unknown depths and fit into their perfect sequence with divine smooth ease.

And there were other more common human relaxations also, hours of putting work aside and thought aside altogether, and just dabbling in sunshine and simple pleasantness. Like most Southerners, Lanier loved a good horse, and a rush through the sharp morning wind helped to shake out the creases in his soul and brush the crumbs of doubt from them. And he found and loved the repose of nature even more than her activity. He knew well that the best medicine for the insupportable fatigue of thought is the quiet of green fields and the mellow oblivion of autumn sunshine. Sometimes he simply touches the soothing features of the outward world and leaves the peace they brought him for the reader to divine: "The sun is shining with a hazy and absent-minded face, as if he were thinking of some quite other star than this poor earth; occasionally a little wind comes along, not warm, but unspeakably bland, bringing strange scents rather of leaves than of flowers." Sometimes he makes perfectly plain what nature says to him and what she might also say to you: "To-day you must forego expression and all outcome, you must remain a fallow field, for the sun and wind to fertilize, nor shall any corn or flower sprout into visible green and red until to-morrow."

Nor is he always serious in his relaxation, but recognizes that sweet and kindly laughter relieves tense nerves and fervid brains more completely than almost anything else, that it at once indicates that the soul is free and makes it so. And laughter not only relaxed, but comforted; for the harsh pressure of circumstances and the bitterness of neglect and rejection were made more tolerable by it. How could a man play more lightly with the peace of home after poverty-



stricken wandering than in such phrases as these: "I confess I *am* a little nervous about the gas-bills, which must come in, in the course of time . . . but then the dignity of being liable for such things is a very supporting consideration. No man is a Bohemian who has to pay water-rates and a street tax. Every day when I sit down in my dining-room—*my* dining-room!—I find the wish growing stronger that each poor soul in Baltimore, whether saint or sinner, could come and dine with me. How I would carve out the merry-thoughts for the old hags! How I would stuff the big wall-eyed rascals till their rags ripped again."

As these words indicate, his social, human instincts went always abreast with his love of merriment. The true life of his soul was solitary, but he would step out of it at any time to feel the warm touch of his fellows and revel in it. And his heart gave warmth as well as drank it in. His large, sunny cheerfulness was infectious, inspired cheerfulness in all about him, even strangers. Not but that he had a temper, could feel a poet's fiery indignation at wrong or meanness or injustice, as when he stood up in his place, in the middle of an orchestra rehearsal, and told the conductor who had spoken brutally to a young woman at the piano just what he thought of him. But the temper never hardened into sullenness, never secreted a long grudge or a blighting quarrel. "I was never able to stay angry in my life."

He liked to share his pleasures with his friends, too. He recognized that music is the eminently social art, and entered with a splendid, ardent zest into the common enjoyment of it. He delighted in a fascinating human mixture of tangled diversions, "Kinsfolk, men friends, women friends, books, music, wine, hunting, fishing, billiards, tenpins, chess, eating, mosquitoless sleeping, mountain scenery, and a month of idleness." He stepped out with ease and grace from the exclusive society of high thoughts: "I hope those are not illegitimate moods in which one sometimes desires to surround one's self with a companionship less awful, and would rather have a friend than a god." He even recognized that the friction of brains with each other is sometimes necessary to push thought to its highest: "There is not enough attrition of mind on mind here, to bring out any sparks from a man."

Lastly, and perhaps in Lanier's case most important,

among all the forms of refuge and repose from the harsh struggle of existence we must place the mighty solace of domestic love and home. Lanier married quite early a very charming woman, and her companionship and comfort were the greatest possible relief in all his troubles and difficulties. Though he wandered widely and his artist's calling took him among all sorts of people and made him friends with all sorts, there was nothing of the Bohemian in his nature. He loved the ties of life, all of them, did not find them ties but sweet intimacies, loved to bind the large divagation of his spirit to the quiet daily habits of hearth and home. And he shared all his ecstasies and enthusiasms with her whom he loved, so far as such things can be shared on this solitary and confining earth.

And the solace of childhood, its grace, its eager gaiety, its wild, wayward self-assertion, shifting into absolute dependence, varied exquisitely the intenser mood of this higher companionship. While the affection for children and wife both is enlarged and interfused with a wider charity which aims to spread its all-involving grasp over those near and far away and like and unlike: "Let us lead them to love everything in the world, above the world, and under the world adequately: that is the sum and substance of a perfect life."

Yet, after all, these elements of repose and distraction, even the most sacred, were but secondary to the mighty effort and struggle to succeed, to achieve, to do great things in the world, to leave a name that should never die. And one asks one's self, as in so many similar cases, but especially with Lanier,—because the struggle was so definite and so desperate,—what was the motive back of it all? Why should a man fling aside health and wealth and ease and the endless variety of ephemeral diversion to give the world what it never asks for, and to demand of it in return what it yields only with brutal reluctance and usually too late? What is the fierce sting, the cruel driving spur that urges the artist onward, till one is sometimes almost driven to conclude that genius consists in the sting itself, even more than in the gifts and powers that it forces to its service?

Is it the mere desire of praise, of applause, of having men honor you and esteem you, point you out and seek your work and treasure it, *volitare per ora virorum*, as the Latin poet expressed it, better than any one has expressed it since?

The best and wisest have recognized this motive, sometimes frankly, sometimes reluctantly, and with vain effort to disguise it under other names. The young Milton knew well that

Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise.

Lanier, who analyzed and dissected everything, did not overlook the value of praise in its crudest forms: "Much reflection convinces me that *praise* is no ignoble stimulus, and that the artist should not despise it—although I am far more independent of praise than formerly, and can do without it perfectly well: yet, when it comes, I keenly enjoy it."

Again, besides the mere love of fame and of applause, there is in the artist the passionate desire to create things beautiful. This seems to be quite different from the appreciation of such things, though naturally such appreciation is implied in it. There are plenty of persons whose sense of all beauty is exquisite, evidently as exquisite as that of any creative artist, who yet are content to drink in and never to give out, who never apparently have the impulse to reproduce or rival the masterpieces that give them the intensest pleasure of their lives. But the artist cannot rest without the devouring effort to realize a new beauty, a different beauty, a beauty more overwhelming, more enduring than even that which intoxicates his whole being as he receives it from others. Many doubtless have felt this passion as keenly as Flaubert and Keats. None has more passionately recorded it. It is the cry that echoes in Phineas Fletcher's simple line.

Ah, singing let me live and singing die.

It echoes everywhere in the letters of Sidney Lanier. "It was a spiritual necessity, I must be a musician, I could not help it. The fury of creation is upon me." "This unbroken march of beautiful-bodied Triumphs irresistibly invites the soul of a man to create other processions like it. I would I might lead so magnificent a file of glories into heaven!"

And with the instinct of creating beauty, there is the instinct of diffusing it. In some artists this appears to be lacking. They are content to achieve the beautiful, to scatter it about them, to leave it behind them, without considering or caring whether the world learns to enjoy it or not. Not theirs to create the seeing eye or the hearing ear. Let such creep in their traces and slowly arrive at comprehension. It was different with Lanier. He burned to make others feel

what he felt, all that he felt. Beauty was not to be his alone, whether conceived or created. It was to light the whole wide world with a radiant glory. "We are all striving for one end," he cried, transfiguring other artists with his own ardor, "to develop and ennoble the humanity of which we form a part." And he could not understand that musicians could be content to give subtle aesthetic emotion to a few, when it was possible to "set the hearts of fifteen hundred people afire."

So we analyze vaguely, imperfectly, the deep motives that lay at the root of such a life struggle as Lanier's. Yet who shall say that we have quite touched the secret, or really, finally, explained why a man should be willing to wear out his life striving, striving, striving for a goal that forever fades away!

As we have analyzed the nature of the struggle and its fury and its motive, so let us consider its outcome and result. There is the result for the artist himself, and the result for others. For himself there is no doubt that the struggle means life. It often means death also, as it did for Keats and for Lanier. Oftener still, it means death in life, health shattered through long years, nerves broken and unstrung, quivering to utter exhaustion with misdirected effort and inadequate desire. The joy of successful creation is shot through with ardor that consumes even while it intoxicates. "Our souls would be like sails at sea; and the irresistible storm of Music would *shred* them as a wind shreds canvas, whereof the fragments writhe and lash about in the blast which furiously sports with their agony." Yet withal he who has once tasted the creative rapture knows nothing else that can be called living beside it. Certainly Lanier's testimony on the point is as explicit as anyone's; "To die, consumed by these heavenly fires:—that is infinitely better than to live the tepid lives and love the tepid loves that belong to the lower planes of activity." And if he says so, it is beyond question true for him; for no man ever lived more fully for the rapture or died more patently from the domination of it.

And the result for others? In Lanier's case, the value of example is clear, even disregarding actual achievement. He was a Southerner, always a Southerner. He loved the South, and the South loved and loves him. And in his day the spur of that glorious spirit, ever toiling, ever hoping, giv-

ing up all material success for the long pursuit of an ideal, was the very stimulus that the young men of the South needed above all others. Who shall say that the young men of the whole country do not need and cannot profit by it now?

Moreover, Lanier's ardent struggle bore fruit in a considerable literary product. Of this the prose criticism and other writings have their place and will probably continue to be read with pleasure by a limited number. But it is the poems that give their author a permanent rank in American literature. With their purely literary quality the psychographer does not concern himself. The testimony of critics of different schools is enough on this point. But to one who comes to the poems fresh from the close study of Lanier's inner life, they must necessarily prove a little disappointing. He gave them grace and dignity and charm and above all, music; but why could he not put his soul into them? He gave them thought and observation, magic of description, and witchery of movement; but why could he not put his soul into them? Flaubert diligently kept his soul out of his novels, and the consequence is that the letters to Mademoiselle X are worth a dozen *Salammbô's* and *Education Sentimentales*. But with Flaubert it was a matter of theory. With Lanier it would seem to be rather an instinctive reserve. Lucretius made all life a fight, as Lanier made it—Lucretius, of whom Lanier himself says,

Lucretius mine  
(For oh, what heart hath loved thee like to this  
That's now complaining?)

Then Lucretius took the dullest subjects in the world, and because he poured the whole of his fighting soul into them, he left the tangled thorns through which he tore his way all glorified with shreds of luminous immortality. Lanier chose the most promising, the most poetical subjects; but somehow the battling spirit is not there. As he himself most aptly says of another, "There is a certain something—a flame, a sentiment, a spark kindled by the stroke of the soul against sorrow, as of steel against flint—which he hath not." *Sunrise* and *The Marshes of Glynn* are no doubt musical, magical, enduring poetry. But there is more to stir my spirit in these lines which throb with the actual passion of the long, despairing fight:

Given, these,  
 On this, the coldest night in all the year,  
 From this, the meanest garret in the world,  
 In this, the greatest city in the land,  
 To you, the richest folk this side of death,  
 By one, the hungriest poet under heaven  
 —Writ while his candle sputtered in the gust,  
 And while his last, last ember died of cold,  
 And while the mortal ice i' the air made free  
 Of all his bones and bit and shrunk his heart,  
 And while soft Luxury made show to strike  
 Her gloved hands together and to smile  
 What time her weary feet unconsciously  
 Trode wheels that lifted Avarice to power,  
 —And while, moreover,—O thou God, thou God—  
 His worshipful sweet wife sat still, afar,  
 Within the village whence she sent him forth  
 Into the town to make his name and fame,  
 Waiting, all confident and proud and calm,  
 Till he should make for her his name and fame,  
 Waiting—O Christ, how keen this cuts!—large-eyed,  
 With Baby Charley till her husband make  
 For her and him a poet's name and fame.

Here, at any rate, we have a torn red bit of Lanier's heart.

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